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A STRATEGY FOR SUCCESS IN THE BURMA
THEATER OF OPERATIONS

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A STRATEGY FOR SUCCESS IN THE BURMA THEATER OF OPERATIONS

PREPARED BY CARL von CLAUSEWITZ

General Slim,

Oct. 1943

Sir, I have recently completed an assessment of the current situation in your theater of operations. While the technology changes are truly dramatic, I'm convinced that my theory developed in **ON WAR** remains relevant to your current situation. I am offering a strategy for success in the spirit of a fellow combat veteran who has had more time to ponder the issues you are currently facing as you begin planning your campaign to retake Burma and prepare to posture your army for combat.

As I have previously stated *theory exists so that one need not start afresh each time sorting out the material and plowing through it, but will find it ready to hand and in good order. It is meant to educate the mind of the future commander, or, more accurately, to guide him in his self-education, not to accompany him to the battlefield*(141). Theory then is the basis for a strategy for the use of engagements for the purpose of winning the war. I hope my observations will assist you in determining the series of actions which will shape the campaign and help you decide on the individual engagements necessary to defeat your enemy.

In preparing my assessment I attempted to identify the reasons for the lack of success in your defense of Burma and the significant successes of the Japanese in their campaigning across

Burma. I also analyzed these successes to identify any weaknesses in their execution, and developed recommendations which may help you in the preparation for recapturing Burma.

The *theater of operations*(280) I looked at is the sector of the war defined by the boundaries of the country of Burma. My first step was to review the plans for the defense. As I have clearly stated *any method by which strategic plans are turned out ready-made as if from some machine, must be totally rejected*(154). Of course this statement doesn't obviate the need for a plan! As I searched for a defensive plan it became clear to me that there was none at the time you took command of your corps. I could find no indication of planning or identified responsibility for any defensive preparations for Burma.

This lack of preparation appears to me to be due to the split between operational and administrative control. I noted that the Chief of Staff of the territorial forces answered to the South-West Pacific Command in Java while the administrative requirements to support the forces was delegated to the Burmese government which coordinated with the British offices in Delhi.

I would sum up my assessment by saying there was no single headquarters charged with the defense of Burma, which meant no coherent plan for the defense of Burma. The Army headquarters in Burma was not organized, manned, nor trained to fight as a maneuver headquarters and the Burma theater was last on the priority list for resupply.

With all of these shortcomings you could not have won the

campaign even with *the skill of the commander, the experience and courage of the troops, and their patriotic spirit*(186).

The Japanese force you faced was a superior, well-trained and equipped, veteran force of jungle trained troops. Their commanders understood the friction between Burma and Siam and attacked unexpectedly through Siam because of the known lack of intelligence cooperation between the countries. They also correctly identified Rangoon as *the center of gravity, the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends*(595-596). Not only is it the capital city but it is also the logistical hub of the country. Your continuously dwindling supplies during your withdrawal along the overland routes from India attest to that.

With Rangoon captured, and your supply lines effectively cut off, the Japanese began a series of tactical geometric envelopments of your forces to the Indian border. As I pointed out, *in tactics time and space are rapidly reduced to their absolute minimum. A unit that is attacked in flank and rear will soon reach the stage where its chance of retreat has vanished: in such a situation it comes close to being completely unable to continue to fight, and the commander must either try to extricate himself from this predicament or prevent it from occurring at all. For this reason all tactical arrangements aimed at envelopment are highly effective, and their effectiveness consists largely in the concern they induce about their consequences. That is why the geometric factor in the disposition of forces is so important*(214).

The ability of the Japanese to conduct a series of these geometric envelopments explains the constant sensing your forces had of being cut-off from their limited resupply lines. Your ability to extract your forces from this confusion speaks highly of your *powers of intellect*. *War is a realm of uncertainty; three quarters of the factors on which action in war is based are wrapped in fog of greater or lessor uncertainty*(101).

While you have experienced this uncertainty the Japanese have not. This may well lead to a level of overconfidence which you can exploit. Two key weaknesses stand out in my analysis of the Japanese campaign plan. One is their continual operations with limited supplies and the second is their rigidity of execution in battle.

I believe the frequent attacks by the Japanese with only nine-days or less of supplies available to the force speaks to their level of overconfidence and a key focus of your tactical planning. If the Japanese commander plans to supply his force from your logistical base, as he has in the past, then you can *frustrate everything through a successful battle*(97) thus denying him access to your assets. By holding and counterattacking at the appropriate time you should be able to strike his forces and destroy them. This planning and execution should be easier because of the set piece execution that the Japanese have demonstrated in their tactical operations.

This rigid adherence to the letter of the orders is the other key weakness of the Japanese. The example which stands out

involves the blocking force which you encountered North of Rangoon. You will recall that it was emplaced to protect the movement of the enveloping force moving to the west to attack the city. This roadblock on the Prome road completely blocked your escape from the city. The fighting to break through ended in stalemate. This could have been disastrous had the Japanese subordinate commander not withdrawn in accordance with his orders after the main force had crossed the road. While I believe that *no other activity is so continuously or universally bound up with chance*(85), this action speaks to rigid discipline to orders not the fog of war. This rigidity tends to make the force brittle and subject to braking if blows are properly placed.

The inflexibility and overconfidence of the Japanese present you with opportunities to develop a successful campaign plan for the theater. You should consider this to determine and express your ultimate intentions for the campaign, remembering that *it takes more strength of will to make an important decision in strategy than in tactics*(178). *Enormous amounts of expertise and skill coalesce into a few great results before they attain their final purpose in war, like streams combining to form rivers before they flow into the sea. The man who wishes to control them must familiarize himself with those activities that empty themselves into the great ocean of war*(144).

The strategist must therefore define the aim for the entire operational side of the war that will be in accordance with its purpose(177). As the commander you will draft the plan of the

war, and the aim will determine the series of actions intended to achieve it: you will, in fact shape the individual campaigns and, within these, decide on the individual engagements(177).

Remember as you prepare to develop your plan that strategy uses maps without worrying about trigonometric surveys; it does not inquire how a country should be organized and a people trained and ruled in order to produce the best military results(144). Lay your map out with only the essential information to help you maintain perspective and linkage while you develop your plan.

You must always think of the linkage to your next higher headquarters. Regard a war and the separate campaigns of which it is composed as a chain of linked engagements each leading to the next.... They are a continuous chain of events.... By looking on each engagement as part of a series...the commander is always on the high road to his goal(182). In war, the subjugation of the enemy is the end, and the destruction of his fighting force the means. That applies to attack and defense alike. By means of the destruction of the enemy's forces defense leads to attack, which in turn leads to the conquest of the country(526). Do not succumb to the idea that the capture of certain geographical points or the seizure of undefended provinces are of value in themselves, regard them as windfall profits(182).

With these thoughts in mind your plan should develop around four key principles. The first should be the ultimate intention

to the campaign which is an offensive one. The second is that the main idea on which the offensive plan is based must be simple. Third it must be clear to all that this offensive idea must be held in view throughout the campaign and everything else must give way to it. The fourth is that the plan must have an element of surprise in it. Remembering that *in strategy surprise becomes more feasible the closer it occurs to the tactical realm, and more difficult the more it approaches the higher levels of policy*(198).

Tactical lessons learned in the previous campaigns of 1942 should also be incorporated into all plans. Units must plan on having Japanese units in their rear and regard the Japanese as being surrounded, not themselves. There should rarely be frontal attacks and never frontal attacks on narrow fronts. Attacks should follow hooks and come in from flank or rear, while pressure holds the enemy in front(geometrical operations). In defense, no attempts to hold continuous lines should be made. Avenues of approach must be covered and enemy penetrations dealt with using mobile reserves. If the Japanese hold the initiative they are formidable. When they lose it they become confused and are easy to kill.

During this campaign planning there are many things that can be accomplished while your forces are on the defensive. *Defense in general is not an absolute state of waiting and repulse: it is not total, but only relative passive endurance. It is permeated with more or less pronounced elements of offensive*(524).

Subordinate units should be conducting offensively focused training to strengthen their physical endurance and continually improve their individual and unit skills. Because of the terrain in the theater they must also concentrate on becoming a light, mobile jungle warfare force with appropriate command and control to keep up with the operations. This is the only way that the units can build confidence in the ability to defeat the Japanese in their own environment.

Once these units have developed a sufficient level of proficiency they should conduct a series of minor offensives against enemy forward detachments. These should be designed and staged with a preponderance of strength to ensure success. These successful operations will build the confidence on the subordinate units and instill the spirit of the offensive in the men.

Simultaneously the supply base must be improved. *An army's needs fall into two categories: those that any agricultural area can provide, and those that can only be obtained from sources located to the rear(341).* Obviously technology has limited the amount of supplies that come from the agricultural base so the supply base and support network are extremely critical to the success of the offensive. Here the airplane plays a key role which I did not envision when I was developing my theory on war. However, the principle of support moving forward from the base remains a critical planning factor to the success of the operation.

I hope that you will read and consider this analysis in the spirit it is intended, to provide you with a strategic assessment of the current situation in your theater of operations. I am confident that you are well on your way to victory if you take council in the immortal words of Sun Tzu, *Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril*(84).

Respectfully,

Karl von Clausewitz